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Socialism and the Organized Labor Movement

By
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LETTER FROM EUGENE V. DEBS

MR. A. M. SIMONS, Chicago, Ill.

My dear Simons:—I have just read the excellent paper on the "Organization of the Workers," by Mrs. Simons, and drop you this line to say that it is the best thing of its kind I have yet seen and to suggest that special efforts be made to have it copied as widely as possible in the Socialist press and especially in Trade Union papers. Although the paper was doubtless designed as a historic sketch, it could not be excelled for propaganda. It is clear, logical, unanswerable. The simplest mind can grasp the argument and its conclusions are inevitable. If the average Trade Unionist who, in his ignorance, has his face set against Socialism would but read this brief economic study with open mind, he could not escape the logic of Socialism. Let me suggest that you have the paper reproduced in the *Review* and that while the type is set you have a number put in leaflet form and sent to the leading labor papers of this and other countries and request that it be copied for the benefit of the working class in general and anti-socialist trade union men in particular. With a little effort it could be spread among the millions. Yours fraternally,

E. V. DEBS.

SOCIALISM AND THE ORGANIZED LABOR MOVEMENT

It must certainly be a matter of the greatest surprise to the student of history who has advanced beyond the point where he looks upon history as the mere record of dynasties, ruling families, and great battles to note the slight reference to the industrial life of the people that historians content themselves with making.

Considering the influence that religious, commercial and industrial guilds exerted on civilized life for so many centuries, it is perfectly plain that the history of certain periods must necessarily be incomplete without a recognition of the guild life. Yet during less than twenty years has any interest been shown in the subject.

If we were to turn only to the romance and poetry of the time we should be forced to see that the guilds played a most important part in the history of early communities. We, in this way, catch a glimpse here and there of the guildsman working in company with his craftsmen, or

of some great procession gaily dressed, marching to celebrate some miracle play.

But, fortunately, there are records that more plainly show the deep economic part taken by these associations. Howell, in his "Trade Unionism," says, "It protected the rights of its members, avenging their wrongs, extending their privileges, fostering their interests and otherwise exercising a beneficial and restraining influence when brute force was in the ascendent and law and public institutions were in their infancy."

They advanced as society advanced, changed in character and scope as new wants arose, and adapted themselves to the progress of civilization.

The guild grew out of the very common need men have felt under certain conditions of gaining strength through union or combination. Their development has marked a certain point of progress and we find one stage of society to which they are peculiar. They flourished best at a time when the growing state was threatened with violence and competition from without, when centralized government was weakest and had least power to enforce contracts and protect its poorest members in their rights.

To mediæval times we must turn to find the highest and most attractive development of the

guilds; but separated by centuries there are to be found organizations so similar as to be quite identical with the Middle Age guilds. A well-defined burgher life was discovered by Marco Polo among the Chinese of the thirteenth century. They existed in Constantinople under the Byzantine princes as well as in the Greece and Rome of ancient times.

Before trying to define the guild itself we must know something of the conditions out of which it grew. First, let us free ourselves entirely from the idea of permanency in social institutions. We will deal with the guilds mainly as industrial associations and must take up first the mode of production that preceded guild production.

The early form of production is known as housework. In this method goods are produced in and for the house from raw materials furnished by the household itself. There was a complete absence of exchange and each household satisfied by its own labor the wants of its members. Each article passed through all the stages of its production in the home in which it was to be consumed. Production was only undertaken as the need of the house demanded. The wealth of the home consisted entirely in goods that were to be consumed and in the crude means of pro-

duction, such as the hand-mill, the axe, the distaff and weaver's loom. All the home contained it owed to its own labor.

But evolution took another course; an independent professional class of industrial laborers arose, and with them wage work. They founded their existence upon their technical skill. They possessed only their simple tools to work with. They exercised their skill upon raw material furnished by some one who produced it and who would consume the finished article. This manner of work aided greatly in freeing the serfs of the Middle Ages from their feudal obligations, as it required no capital to begin on.

Yet another change and we are brought into the handicrafts. This step was taken when the master-workman himself furnished the raw material upon which the apprentices and journeymen worked. The thing that distinguished the handicraftsman from the wage-worker was that he possessed all the means of production and sold for a definite price the finished article which was the product of his own raw material and his own labor. The consumer bought from the actual manufacturer when manufacturer meant one who worked with his hands.

It was a principle that handicraft endeavored

to carry out wherever possible that an article should pass through all the stages of its preparation in the same workshop. Handicraft is a phenomenon peculiar to the town. People like the Russians, who have developed no real town life, have likewise no national handicraft. This explains why, with the formation of large centralized states and unified commercial territories, handicrafts were doomed to decline.

The guilds have been divided into three classes, Religious or Social guilds, Merchant and Craft guilds, but the distinction is more general than precise. Each shared to a greater or less extent in the character of the other. Religious guilds were sometimes Merchant and Trade guilds, while Merchant and Craft guilds were interwoven with each other, the one overlapping the other. It is more particularly the pure Craft guilds and Merchant that we will trace here.

The Merchant guild was a society formed primarily for the purpose of obtaining and maintaining the privilege of carrying on trade. This privilege implied the possession of a monopoly of the trade in each town by the guild brethren, and also the liberty to trade in other towns.

The Merchant guilds in mediæval times had always more or less an aristocratic leaning. It

is the general opinion that originally the "Guild Merchants" was an association of the owners of the land on which the town was built and owners of estates in the neighborhood. Eventually the aristocratic municipality had to give way, in some instances only after a fierce struggle, to the general body of the citizens represented by the craft guilds.

There is no doubt but that when communities first began to take form there was no definite dividing line between the merchants and the craftsmen. The craftsmen were admitted to equal privileges with the merchants. Everywhere the craftsmen traded in the raw material with which they worked, the separation between the trader or merchant and the handicraftsman being a gradual one. The struggle between the two ended in many places, as for instance in London, in the complete victory of the craftsmen.

Throughout all the oldest towns of Europe we find that the guilds preceded the more extended governing body for the community generally. That is, the guilds existed prior to the formation of town councils or municipalities. Many guilds had regular charters from the crown before charters were granted to the burgh.

In its nature the guild therefore fostered local-

ism. It was rather a neighborhood affair than otherwise. This was one cause for its success in the Middle Ages. Throughout the towns of Italy and the continent in general we find an excessive localism marking the citizens of each town. They gathered in pride about their own cathedral tower and profoundly admired their own arts and institutions. In this the guild appealed to the social side of man's nature and taught him regard for his neighbor. More than this, the guild benefited its members in an individual way, giving them both work and pleasure and so closely mingling those two elements in life that they were inseparable.

The whole of mediæval life outside agriculture moved within the circle of the guild, and the real power of that organization lay as much in its close connection with every detail of everyday life as in its relation to national life. They were not mere formal associations. "Their members sat together at the feast, stood by one another's honor in the market, lived in the same quarter, shared the same purchase, marched side by side in the pageant, acted together in the play and fought together in the part of the city wall committed to their care. The apprentice sat at his master's table for seven years, somewhat after

the manner of an adopted son, and on attaining the membership of the guild he gained a recognized and honorable position in the land."

Perhaps nowhere do we find a better example of the perfection of the guild system or the local pride characterizing it than in the history of Florence, and there is no doubt that Florence owes its artistic and industrial supremacy in mediæval times to the guild system. Through its means the Florentines succeeded in destroying every trace of feudalism and in reaching the highest point of freedom reached in the middle ages. Out of this democracy there came a literature and art produced by the artisan class.

Every citizen took a share in political life, being trained to it by the guild organization, which was a self-ruling association with separate magistrates, laws and councils. The crafts in Italy are of great antiquity, and in addition to their original purpose, more especially during the mediæval times, they acquired a purely political character. They in this way helped to counterbalance the power of the nobles. In course of time, owing to the growing power of the state, they changed in character and devoted themselves to the regulation of their crafts and the performing of friendly offices to their members.

The right of entry into the guild was not hereditary, but was conferred on any one actually following the trade. The craftsmen were divided into apprentices and masters, with occasionally the intermediate grade of journeymen. Before passing from one grade to another a period of service was at least necessary and more commonly the production of a masterpiece (Meisterstück) was also required.

In Germany the guilds lost their legal recognition in 1860, but a reaction began. Young men had gone into business with no technical training and failed. From this and other causes the defenders of the guilds succeeded in obtaining recognition for them again and they once more became operative but not compulsory. Again the apprentice test, the three years Wanderzeit and the Meisterstück became a test of membership.

Russia seems to have been as far behind in the matter of guilds as in everything else. They did not spring up currently with social progress, but by legal enactment. They are not a national institution and have not the characteristics of those of Western Europe. They were founded in the eighteenth century by Catherine the Great, who wished to encourage industry in the towns.

The London Guilds or Livery companies are the oldest craft and merchant guilds in Europe. They acted as benefit societies, relieving in sickness or old age the workman who had contributed to it in health. The London companies were originally almost wholly craft guilds and at an early period obtained control of the city and here we must distinguish more plainly between craft and merchant guilds. The craft guilds were associations of all the artisans engaged in a particular industry. Before this time there existed no great body of artisans, that is, men whose time was devoted principally to particular manufactures.

The home or the monastery had been for the most part self-sufficient, that is, the labor of the group supplied the needs of the group. With the guild system came the beginning of a "division of labor" and the growth of a larger circle of exchange. These craft guilds were made up for the most part of small master manufacturers.

The principle of the guild was no doubt to make personal interest subservient to the general good, but unless one is blinded by the rose hues of sentimentality it is impossible to fail to see that the guildsmen were often harsh and unruly and hostile to those outside the association.

The rules prescribed for the exercise of trade were hard and fast. Severe punishment was meted out when the goods proved of inferior quality, defective or counterfeit. There was great care as to accuracy of measures and each article was labeled recording any defects there might be. The books and accounts of each merchant were carefully examined. Any guildsman found showing to a non-member any of the tricks of the trade was summarily dealt with.

With the further development of manufacturing the master workmen began to hire labor. Systematic hiring of labor was only partial even up until late in the eighteenth century. The workmen still depended partly on husbandry for support and again they frequently received part of their pay in board and lodgings. These hired workmen began to protect themselves by association, but no great combinations of labor could take place until there was a large body of workmen all working at the same trade and working together. As early as 1775 we find disconnected and not permanent combinations of hired laborers. The guilds as a dominant force in society ended in the reign of Henry VIII. or Edward VI. Still some influence extended to the end of the eighteenth century. From the time of Elizabeth.

state regulation of industry took the place of Guild Law. The modern trade union has few points in common with the ancient guild.

The guild was an organization of producers who possessed the tools and materials with which they worked and were associated, not for the purpose of obtaining a greater part of the things they produced, for they received the full returns of their labor, but to regulate trade and manufacturing, the quality and quantity of goods and also the number of laborers in a given trade.

The trade union is a combination of men dispossessed of tools and material who sell their labor power and receive in return but a fraction of what they produce. Hence the aim of the first was to perfect and dispose of their produce, of the second, to secure a greater share of the produce. The latter alone is an association against exploitation.

We might say that the first trade union was established in 1796 by the clothworkers of Yorkshire at Leeds, but it was only a transitory association, as were all others of this time, called forth by some particular occasion and dissolving as soon as the object was accomplished. But up to 1824 was in reality a time of transition. This was necessarily so as combinations of laborers

were wellnigh impossible. The economists with their wage-fund theory and their doctrine of freedom of contract denounced any such unions of laborers, contending that they were useless on the one hand and infringed the rights of laborers to sell their labor power as they pleased on the other. The Combination Laws that reflected these ideas and made impossible such associations were only repealed in 1824.

During this transition period we find recorded unions, usually called friendly societies, of the Bookbinders 1792, the Compositors 1801, the Ironfounders 1809 and Branches of the Engineering trade in 1823-24. In 1824, then, Trade Unionism had its birth in England. The first thirty years of Trade Unionism were marked by their still being largely under the ban of the law. They had no recognized status as corporate bodies, their funds and property being absolutely without legal protection. The year 1850 marks a step in the old Trade Unionism. At that time the engineering trades amalgamated and the provident benefits were systematized and were made a part of the constitution. This side of Trade Unionism became henceforth of great importance. There grew up five principal ways in which this fund was distributed: (1) The meet-

ing of the expense of burial of dead members and sometimes their wives. (2) Sick benefits. These were introduced later. (3) Superannuated allowances. (4) Accident benefits. These did not exist in all trades, but only in the most dangerous. (5) Out of work allowances.

Trade Unions then are voluntary associations for mutual protection and assistance. The old guilds were voluntary, but they become more and more restrictive in their actions and arbitrary in their methods. The avowed object of the Trade Union is the maintenance and advancement of the industrial interests of its members. Although the trade unionist may deny the class struggle or may fail to recognize it, nevertheless the very existence of the Trade Union proves such a struggle.

Certain points have been particularly dwelt on by trade unionists. They have sought first to obtain the highest rate of wages the industry will bear. In this they have for the most part acted independently for their own members alone, giving no attention to other trades. (2) They have sought to discourage overtime work, even when extra pay is given. (3) Piece work is disapproved, since the variations in style and quality of materials makes the fixing of wages extremely difficult as well as the hours of work. (4) They

stand opposed to gang work and the task system.

It has been only during the past thirty years that the Trade Union has been a recognized institution. Up to 1889 its history was quite uniform. It was characterized by the large sums spent in benefits, by a moderate use of the strike and by a lack of interest in politics. It was not believed that any benefits could be secured through working for legislation. The old trade union was organized by separate trades, that is to say, trade autonomy existed.

Since 1889 a new phase has been entered upon by many Trade Unions. The funds devoted to benefits have been decreased and the strike fund increased. The strike has come to be used more frequently as a weapon and in this the union is once more a "fighting machine." Politics are no longer shut out of the discussions of the unions. Many of the new unionists believe in using legislation and in obtaining things through it, but most noticeable of all is the growth, slow but sure, of a realization of the class struggle and a gradual drawing toward the position of the socialists.

Again the Trade Union with the growth of industry has taken on a new form. The new organization is industrial in character. Before

this each trade was organized separately, for the trade was greater than the industry. Now the industry has absorbed or wiped out the importance of the trade and unions have become industrials, that is to say, all working in a certain industry are associated together in one great union.

The Trade Union has been a product of capitalism and was born of necessity. When labor recognized the helplessness of the individual to meet the strength of capital alone it sought by combination to cope with this new force. But the difficulties of labor increased when the power of capital to perfect its organization became evident. Labor could never expect to become so thoroughly organized as capital, although this may still be the dream of the Trade Union.

The union has depended upon the competition among themselves of employers, but as the trust is more and more perfected, it becomes the sole employer in a single industry and if the union strike in one place the trust has but to remove production to some one of its other plants or to stop the supply of that particular produce until the laborer is forced by starvation to return. But so mechanical has much of production become to-day that unskilled labor can in many

industries fill the places of strikers and the business proceeds without loss to the employers. Always outside the doors of the shop or factory stands the great army of the unemployed.

So long as the trade union confined itself solely to an economic struggle it could hope at best to be only partly successful.

But what now is the attitude of Socialism to Trade Unionism? Unfortunately, early in the history of Socialism in America, Trade Unionism was so fiercely antagonized by certain leaders that the Unionist took up a hostile position and looked unfavorably on Socialists. This misunderstanding is peculiarly to be regretted here where labor, more than anywhere else in the world, demands all its forces if it is to meet, as it must here, the most advanced capitalism of the world.

If we examine the relation of Unionism and Socialism in other countries we find that in Belgium it was not the Unions but the Socialist party that originated first and the Unionist is invariably a Socialist. In Denmark, Unionist and Socialist are terms well nigh synonymous. In Germany the Unions are strongly Socialist. In France they work in complete coöperation. In the two great English speaking countries there

has been thus far little sympathy between these two labor movements. No doubt one reason that the Unionist has taken but slowly to a political party has been the fact that in England the first trade societies were formed before the working man had received the franchise and being organized as pure and simple trade societies they have thought by these means to accomplish their object. When Unionism grew up in the United States the same organization was introduced, ignoring the fact that the American had a weapon in the ballot. Nevertheless the policy adopted up to to-day has been that of the old Trade Unionism for the most part.

There is, however, no fight on between these two forces. The Socialist sees clearly that trade unions are helpless to solve the problem of labor to-day when the interest of labor and capital have grown to be international and when cheap, unskilled labor can in most industries fill the places of union men.

Many a trade unionist must dispossess himself of the idea that he can still rise to the ranks of the employing class and that the hard and fast line of classes drawn by the Socialist is imaginary. The unprejudiced observing man must, if he stops to think, surrender this position. There

is little more hope for the man born into the laboring class to-day to rise from his class than for the low caste Indian to become a Brahmin.


The Unionists are the thinkers for the most part of the laboring class and as the unions are forced into politics, those politics will inevitably come to be the politics of the laboring class—Socialist Politics.

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